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*BEYOND MORAL IDEALISM*

GEORGE PLIMPTON ADAMS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

To an increasing number of people the idea that a religion which means to be something more than an heroic moral idealism has any significant place in the modern world seems open to grave doubts. Moreover, a large body of traditional metaphysical doctrines and systems are being subjected to much the same sort of criticism which religion is called upon to face. Three general arguments are used to show that both traditional religion and traditional metaphysics are no longer able to do what clear thinking and enlightened practice demand.

Both religion and metaphysical idealism—for this is usually the traditional philosophy that is in question—seem to concern themselves with more ultimate and absolute truths than ever arise in the actual world of scientific and moral judgments. Moral idealism, on the other hand, is content with the humbler task of the organization of our social experience, the relief of poverty, the freeing of human life everywhere from the obstructions which greed and ignorance impose,—with acting everywhere in the light of ideals wholly relative to the best we know and can do. Religion and metaphysical idealism purport to relate us to destinies so ultimate and so absolute that either we dare not trust in their efficacy for us in our present toil and labor, or else we scoff at them for their aloofness. To trust in absolute ideals and truths, and to suppose that in the blank contemplation of these deliverance will come, instead of setting to and winning those ideals which, because they are relative, can really serve us, is declared to be futile.

A second failure attributed to the older religion and metaphysics is their blurring of certain profound and unresolvable distinctions which common sense and practical life have found to be indispensable. The necessary and matter-of-fact differences between good and bad, between the real and the ideal, are blunted

and blurred, we are told, so that we are actually deceived about our world and our hopes. That which an enlightened judgment would regard as evil is taken up and "sublated" in the religious experience and in absolute idealism, and declared to be evil only because of our failure to see how good it really is. The result is, in Professor Perry's phrase, "a moral promiscuousness," where the all-goodness of the world "contradicts the moral distinction between good and evil." Or, again, the very essence of religion is supposed to consist in blurring the distinction between the actual and the ideal. The world, so religion is supposed to say, is in its true nature a perfect and complete system; the apparent separation for us between the real and the ideal is but illusory. Must not the moral consciousness judge such a religion to be utterly perverse? For morality, "the ideal is always something not as yet reached, and every apparent instance of its realization in an actual experience is an illusion which close inspection or more adequate analysis will dispel. For religion, on the other hand, the actualized ideal is not only real, but is the supreme and, in the full sense of the word, the only reality, and it is the apparent reality of that which conflicts with the ideal that is the illusion."<sup>1</sup> But why struggle for an ideal which is already real, why labor for a cause which already possesses the world?

A third way of stating the central defect of religion and of metaphysical idealism is to say that they involve ideals and values and entities which are transcendent with respect to those which experience shows us. The moral world, like the scientific world, is autonomous, in need of no external sanctions and standards such as religion is supposed to provide. The scientific and democratic motives demand this freedom from everything extrinsic and irrelevant. In the consciousness of this demand, the older religion and the older metaphysics have in substance perished.

These three counts in the indictment,—the three fallacies of absolutism, of the blurring of obvious distinctions, and of the transcendent,—are closely connected with each other. Any discussion of one implies some reckoning with the others. I shall here limit myself, however, to the third of these supposed fal-

<sup>1</sup> A. E. Taylor, *The Problem of Conduct*, p. 471.

lacies. I think it can be shown that no wholesale protest against all transcendence, as being futile and irrelevant, is quite to the point, least of all in the interests of moral idealism. I shall hope to make it clear that the motive—at any rate, one chief motive which has led to the belief in certain transcendent ideals and meanings—is a significant one, that it is the partial recognition of this motive which makes possible both morality and moral idealism, and that the difficulties which are found with traditional religion and metaphysics concern rather the form in which this motive has found expression than the motive itself. I mean that there is still reason in going somewhat beyond moral idealism, and recognizing that moral idealism, in order to do and to be what its best wishers might desire, must be something more than moral idealism. That this more than moral idealism will differ profoundly from traditional metaphysics and theology, ought to go without saying; the objections urged against the old habits of thought are valid. But let our care be that in bringing to light the ambiguities and failures of traditional systems, we do not neglect what of permanent value may be there.

Now the motive here referred to, a motive which has been the inner source of much of the enthusiasm generated by Christianity and by historic idealism, can be stated abstractly thus: Any moment of experience,—yes, any fact whatever,—has more meaning and more value than that fact itself discloses, or than the moment of experience itself verifies. The existence and meaning of things are in some measure incommensurable. When stated in terms of the moral experience, this principle means that the moral significance of a deed overflows the bare limits of the deed itself, that the deed means more than it simply is, that its influence and effects literally transcend its own meagre and brief life as a deed. When stated in terms of the religious experience, or better, of the religious attitude, it means that there are more significant and comprehensive meanings which attach to an act performed, or to a life lived, than belong to it as a merely human experience in a limited social environment. For the religious attitude the meaning possessed by an act is fraught with it knows not how much cosmic significance; the act or life is creative of something which adds to the total worth of things, and a worth

that will be conserved. But in whatever form this principle is stated, whether abstractly or as a principle of the moral or of the religious consciousness, it is throughout a principle of transcendence, the transcendence or disparity, namely, between what anything is and what it means. Morality and religion both live by just their recognition of this transcendence. A moral idealism which would save itself by setting up a barrier beyond which no meanings and values are to be sought, a moral idealism which limits its endeavors to the world of human and social activities in the interests of the supposedly modern abhorrence of everything transcendent, such an idealism is only half aware of its own significance and power.

With the whole modern demand for autonomy, the modern protest against any ideals so transcendent that they seem to be arbitrary and irrelevant, to be brought forcibly into our experience from some remote Beyond,—with this profound motive of modern reflective thought, both moral idealism and religion have to reckon. One may say, indeed, that this is the insight of all critical philosophy, that standards, ideals, truths, and values must grow out of and reflect the concrete situation in which they are to prove effective. If an ideal or value or plan of action is imposed from without, no matter with what transcendental and supernatural sanction, it is not the duty of any rational or moral being to recognize it save as it reflects his own interests and his own deepest purposes. Whether one calls this self-realization or autonomy, democracy or naturalism, it is this right and duty to form and express one's own interests, to let the concrete situation reflect itself in relevant ideals and values, that is to be prized above all else. "To set up 'ideals' of perfection which are other than the serious recognition of the possibilities of development resident in each concrete situation, is in the end to pay ourselves with sentimentalities, if not with words, and meanwhile it is to direct thought and energy away from the situations which need and which welcome the perfecting care of attention and affection."<sup>2</sup> It would thus seem to be the very life of moral idealism to protest against all metaphysical ideals and transcendent values which religion seems obviously to insist upon.

<sup>2</sup> Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 422.

A return to the naturalism and sanity of Greek ethics is urged in behalf of a sound moral idealism. Greek ethics at its best, we are told, at any rate conceived the problem in the right way. The Greek moralists undertook the definition of a natural Good, consonant with the interests which struggle to assert themselves in the natural world of a cultivated and eager society. How much more human and moral was this than the striving after remote, transcendental duties, supposed to have their origin in a non-natural or supernatural realm, with which Christianity and absolute idealism have concerned themselves. The return to the Greek definition of morality in terms of natural interest rather than duty, but reinforced by the wealth of modern biology and psychology, with their rooting of all interests in the one continuous world of nature,—this is the programme of a pure moral idealism. The subjection of natural interests to transcendent standards, the dominance of religion and metaphysical idealism in the modern world, has served but to confuse men, to withdraw them from devotion to the common task; morality, single-minded and pure of heart, proceeds with its task of discipline and organization untroubled by the thought of those vague and remote issues in the presence of which all thought and action seem vain and hopeless.

When, however, we come to closer quarters with religion and historical idealism, when we look for the actual motives which inwardly seek expression in something beyond moral idealism, when we ask for the main use which the ethical religions and historical idealisms have made of this concept of transcendent norms, we find indeed that they are but endeavoring to express in their own way and more explicitly, just that motive which lies at the heart of the moral consciousness and of moral idealism. I shall consider very briefly four concepts, found both in the higher ethical religions and in historical idealisms, which illustrate this fundamental motive,—the concepts of symbolism, of revelation, of loyalty, and of mysticism. The fundamental principle here involved is, once more, the insight that things and acts which are taken up into either a moral or a religious interest actually possess more meaning than seems to belong to them as empirical things or acts.

First, symbolism. The history of religion is, in large part, the history of man's attempt to provide symbols for values with which he feels himself vitally concerned, and which he thinks of as requiring symbols just because they are more comprehensive and potent than any fact which he ever verifies empirically. The fetich, the totem, the idol, the sacrificial meal, the sacraments, are symbolic of meanings which are incommensurable with any given fact or given thing. The inveterate tendency to pantheism in all the higher religions is the outcome of regarding *all* facts as symbolic of some mysterious and divine Whole. John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist, gives a typical expression of this motive in the following words: "True religion never finds itself out of the infinite sphere of the Divinity. A good man finds every place he treads upon holy ground. To him the world is God's temple; he is ready to say with Jacob, How dreadful is this place! this is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven."<sup>3</sup>

Here would seem to be the bond between the aesthetic and the religious consciousness. Art is merely an artificial and consciously controlled attempt to construct and appreciate objects whose function it is to symbolize meanings which transcend the object as a mere thing. Thus the belief that the things of experience mean more than we ever adequately verify, that our experience is symbolic of a meaning which cannot be exhausted, but which at best we can only symbolize,—this it is which makes the concept of symbolism so central a one in the higher religions. Philosophy, too, has in its own way expressed this motive, when it has spoken of the incommensurability between experience and things-in-themselves, when it has said that our experience can only symbolize, and but partially express, the real nature of things. "You seek the meaning and the end of your action; you ask for some sufficient reason for living; do you not feel that it is contradictory to address yourself to the science of phenomena, seeing that, from the strictly scientific point of view, phenomena have not in themselves their own *raison d'être*? That which you seek is beyond phenomena, and it is symbols alone that can, not make you comprehend it, but reveal it to you."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by W. R. Inge in *Contentio Veritatis*, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup> Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion*, p. 325.

Secondly, revelation. The concept of revelation, which seems remote enough from common sense and concrete experience, is nevertheless an essential ingredient of all religion. For the religious attitude, once more, things mean more than they are, and what is this but to say that the "more" which anything means is revealed through the object. The object is a symbol of that which it but imperfectly reveals. To say with the pious that God reveals himself to man is to say that what man possesses in his experience is a symbol of what he might possess, of a Good which is not yet made completely his own. For naturalism or factualism, facts are just what they are experienced as being, and nothing more. "Everything is what it is, and not another thing," as Bishop Butler tersely expressed it, not meaning, however, to state the principle of naturalism. For religion, as for idealism, there is in the least and most unworthy fact a prophecy of that greater wealth of meaning but partially revealed in the fact as it appears. The religious attitude is then necessarily one of faith in the unseen potentialities and meanings of things.

Thirdly, loyalty. At no point does religion seem more to conflict with reflective thought than in its demand that a man shall serve causes and purposes which are given him to serve, rather than those purposes which are continuous with his own interests. For, as we have seen, reflective thought is convinced that no ideals are significant unless they are projected from the spontaneous, natural interests of man. His interests, his desires, his impulses are but to be clarified and organized in his ideals. He is to form his ideals. They are to be the ministers of his natural wants and interests.

Well and good; but religion asks of a man that he *serve* the ideal, that he use his energies and his life as an instrument not as an end, that he regard himself with his natural interests as a loyal subject of purposes which he does not create, of plans to which he in no wise contributes, but which are given him to serve and to further. "The essence of religion is that man is *not* shut up in himself as an individual, but able to escape into a wider consciousness, of which his mind and will may become the organ."<sup>5</sup> Not as a free maker of ideals, but as a loyal servant of the Most High,

<sup>5</sup> Caird, *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*, vol. ii, p. 620.



does the religious attitude find its worthiest expression. Is there any solution of this antinomy between morality with its freedom to make ideals, and religion with its insistence on the service of ideals which are already there inviting loyal service? Yes, if one is willing to confess that one's interests and desires, one's very self indeed, has more meaning and really is more than one himself ever verifies. One may then say, "This which I now wish to do or to be, this present ideal of mine which expresses my interests as I now know them, and which I have accordingly framed,—this is no worthy ideal, because my interests, my desires, my self, are more than they now show themselves to be. I do not and cannot completely experience the whole meaning of myself. Hence it may be that in devoting myself to an ideal which demands more than my present interests, as I know them, would of themselves freely give,—it may be that in truth I am actually fulfilling the real requirements of my interests." The ideal which seems so remote and so transcendent would, so the religious attitude believes, be freely chosen, could one determine the whole of what his self means.

Fourthly, mysticism. From various quarters it has come to be recognized that in some sense mysticism occupies a central position in all religion. One need not go to the extreme of saying, with Boutroux, that the essence and foundation of all intense religion is mysticism. But mysticism,—in the sense of a profound discontent with the obvious, a search for those more remote meanings which overflow the barriers of the common presuppositions and discourse of men,—this indeed, with the sense of symbolism, of some sort of revelation, and of inclusive purposes which demand the loyal devotion of men's energies, probably accounts for most of the attitudes which we call religious.

Is not, now, the distinctively moral attitude and moral experience remote enough from all this? Is this all fancy and myth, with which stern duty has nothing to do? What has the religious attitude with its search for the meanings of things which overlap their existence as things,—what has this to do with doing one's duty and obeying the moral law? How is the religious attitude related to the moral attitude, to a purified moral idealism? The answer is that the moral experience also is vitally

concerned with the truth of the doctrine that one's decisions, one's deeds, have meanings which extend far beyond the brief life of those deeds and decisions as such. To act morally means precisely to act with conscious reference to the more ultimate meaning of one's acts, and not to limit one's vision to the act as satisfying isolated impulses or demands. The only moral argument one can address to the wrong-doer is, "Your deed really is more, and means more, than your present contracted self is aware of. Open your eyes to the thousand unseen implications and influences of this your deed, see it in its context, and see the havoc that it makes."

There is one application of this general principle which is deserving of special notice from the point of view of both ethics and religion. We have seen that for both the religious and the moral attitudes certain facts or deeds are fringed with a network of meanings and values, which the mere facts taken by themselves never exhaust but only symbolize or reveal. Morality consists in seeing something of this real context of meanings and acting with conscious reference to it. But morality has to do with the deeds of conscious selves, and hence the central problem for any reflective morality is, Who, then, is the self whose actions enter into the moral world? Is the self in reality anything more than it seems to itself to be? Does the self mean more than it is? Is there any common-sense view, any patent fact about the self, which needs to be revised and transcended if one would consciously act with reference to what the self means and really is? Now the enlightened moral consciousness and the higher ethical religions have made very much depend on one's insight into the fact that one's self is not the peculiarly private and severed thing that it appears to be, especially when the self is identified with the body. The self, the organized totality of one's interests, really is, and means, much more than such a self at any one moment is able to verify. The moral self is more than the private self, means more than anything that the private self, as just this single being, is ever aware of. Here, if anywhere, morality must transcend the obvious, must see things which are not real, if by real one means things most accessible and immediate. For what is more obvious than just this impervious and thoroughly individual

character of the self, and what seems more remote from sound common sense than the doctrine which declares that these apparently impervious selves have more meanings than they are now aware of, and that in order to realize what these meanings are the illusion of their sundered individuality must be overcome. "The universal will of the moral insight must aim at the destruction of all which separates us into a heap of different selves, and at the attainment of some higher positive aim. The 'one undivided soul' we are bound to make our ideal."<sup>6</sup>

Morality and religion have ever to face the charge of being perverse and paradoxical, mere artifice and exaggeration rather than wholesome, sane contentment with the wiser provisions of nature. Their truths sound strange and hard to common sense with its acceptance of the obvious, its reluctance to go from what a thing is to the more that it means. The paradox of self-sacrifice, of dying to live, of losing one's life to save it, is a paradox as long as one sees only the obvious; perchance it will seem true when one sees through and beyond the obvious to the transcendent meaning of it.

I have tried to indicate that in their radical discontent with the merely apparent, in their search for more meanings than are ever verified, in keeping their vision fixed on the implied meanings of things, both morality and religion have a common root. But does not the distinction and even enmity between morality and religion still remain, even after we have recognized that both share this mental attitude of radical discontent with things as they are, and that both desire to live and act with reference to the more that things always mean? Does not morality always say to religion,

"My paths are in the fields I know,  
And thine in undiscover'd lands"?

Morality seems to concern itself with social facts, with making clashing interests compatible, with the control of impulses in the light of certain social principles,—in short, with the organization of life, and all of life's concrete interests. Religion seems transcendent, it seems to bring in unreal agents and sanctions.

<sup>6</sup> Royce, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, p. 193.

From the point of view of religion, the moral experience is no mere social fact, to be taken merely for what it appears to be; it is endowed with cosmic and ultimate significance, it relates man to a realm over and above the given world of social experience.

Yes, one must answer, religious idealism is beyond moral idealism. The meanings with which religion invests life are more than the meanings which morality and moral idealism give to the deeds brought within its field of vision. But the more than morality which religion and historical idealisms have tried to express,—perhaps all too unsuccessfully—has been just what we should expect if our analysis of the moral consciousness is true. Morality itself, the discontent with the obvious, the search for the final implications of an act, does not all of this, does not even morality itself mean something beyond itself? Is the mental habit of looking for meanings,—this mental habit which has generated morality, which is but another name for reflection,—is this to rest content with morality itself as a mere fact, or is it to ask for the meaning of morality too? Psychologically, I doubt not, it is this habit of looking beyond any datum for the meanings that it involves,—for the system that renders it intelligible,—which accounts for the persistence of a religious idealism transcending moral idealism. For the religious attitude, as distinct from the moral, God is a name for the ultimate something which makes morality and the moral search for meanings both possible and significant. Whether it is legitimate to put to the whole of the moral world a question which in the first instance we ask only within that world, is a logical and metaphysical problem, which it would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss. But whether logically justifiable or not, it has its psychological roots in the habit for which morality itself is responsible, the habit of believing that things have more meanings than, of themselves, they disclose. Once become conscious of what you do, as a moral agent, in putting the question as to what a contemplated act really means for the larger system to which it belongs, and you will find yourself asking for the meaning of this whole moral world itself. You will have advanced from moral idealism to a religious idealism.

I have more than once spoken of religion and historical idealisms together, as if they were inwardly connected. Historical idealisms are those systems of thought which have regarded as legitimate this question as to the total or cosmic significance of the world of moral activity. In this respect they have been the reflective expressions of religion. Both religion and historical idealisms have tried to say something about a larger system, or setting, which "makes experience possible," or which makes morality possible. Experience, and the facts of experience, are not for either religion or metaphysical idealism mere data, to be described just as they are,—they are regarded as the expressions of something which transcends experience simply in the sense of making it possible and giving it meaning. For opposite ways of thinking, notably for positivism, definite barriers are set beyond which one must not ask, What does it mean? One must "describe the facts of experience," and not raise the question as to any ultimate meaning which these facts may have, or any more basic principles which make experience possible. It is not without reason that Kant with his transcendental problem as to "what makes experience possible," is the chiefest foe of positivism and factualism.

It has perhaps been the mistake of historical idealisms, as of religion, that they have believed themselves able to answer this question about the more ultimate meanings in terms of a final, absolute, and all-inclusive system. It may be that such a solution is not for us now. The concepts of evolution and development, the dynamic concepts, have entered too deeply into our habits of thought to permit us to remain content with older expressions of the religious motive. The motive itself, however, endures; although religious idealism, which is more than moral idealism because it asks for the more ultimate and cosmic meanings of morality and of all human activity, must ever be dissatisfied with its old expressions, and ever seek more adequate formulation.